

Illinois Reps Talk Social Security at WTC

By Natasha Wasinski

The Phoenix

March 2, 2005

Professors, students and concerned citizens packed three rooms in the 25 E. Pearson Building Monday morning for a town hall meeting. Illinois senators Dick Durbin and Barack Obama and Congresswoman Jan **Schakowsky** discussed President George Bush's plans to privatize Social Security.

The discussion and presentation, titled "Guaranteeing and Strengthening Social Security for All Generations," highlighted the flaws in Bush's privatization proposal and stressed the urgency for citizens to take action and defend Social Security benefits for future generations. The event was hosted by **Schakowsky's** office.

The meeting included a panel and a slideshow presentation in Kasbeer Hall. However, due to the the large turnout the audience overflowed into the Rubloff Auditorium and another room on the first floor of the building to watch the presentation on a TV monitor. After the discussion, Durbin, Obama and Schakowsky each made an appearance in the other rooms.

Durbin, the current Democratic whip in the Senate, opened the forum by explaining the motivation to create the Social Security program.

"Seventy years ago President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw that senior Americans [had] reached a point where they couldn't live in dignity," Durbin said.

Durbin said that before the creation of Social Security, if seniors did not move in with their

families, they were forced to move into federally-funded housing, which put the burden of their support on the rest of the nation. Durbin said President Roosevelt created the Social Security program because he believed that as a nation we could do a better job of accommodating the elderly.

Obama agrees that Americans should still have responsibility for one another today.

"Our vision has been that we all have a stake in each other," Obama said. "[Social Security] is a simple yet profound program [and] without it there will be a few winners and a whole lot of losers."

Durbin stated that due to Social Security and Medicare, fewer seniors today are living in poverty. He added that people live longer nowadays and seniors are more independent than ever before.

Durbin also explained that Social Security is not used only to benefit retirees: One-third of the program supports people who are disabled as well as survivors of deceased family members.

One woman in the audience spoke on behalf of disabled citizens. The woman, who has been disabled since the age of eight, said that without Social Security she and others who are disabled would be living on the streets.

"Seventy-five percent of the disabled cannot or do not work," she said. "There is an inherent message [in the Social Security program]: We care about each other."

While both senators and **Schakowsky** agreed there is a financing problem with Social Security, they said Bush's privatization proposal is not the answer.

Obama downplayed the portrayal of Social Security as a program in crisis and instead labeled it as under "strain."

If the current program is not changed, Social Security benefits will fall short by 25 percent in 2042, a gap Obama said can be fixed as easily as increasing the cap on payroll taxes or rolling back President Bush's tax cuts. Other solutions include slowly increasing the retirement age, which was done previously in the 1990s.

Both senators also expressed concerns about the United States' debt, which future generations will have to pay back, and the government's current practice of borrowing between \$3-5 trillion from Japan, Taiwan, China and Korea.

Obama pointed out that Democrats are willing to look at a whole range of options, but he stressed the idea that a privatization plan does not solve all of Social Security's financial problems.

"The language of privatization is a Trojan horse to destroy a system that has worked," Obama said. "[Social Security] is the bedrock for what in America it means to care for the vulnerable."

Concern about a Social Security crisis has been present in American politics for over a decade. In the early 1990s, a bipartisan commission examined possible ways to strengthen Social Security in order to prevent financial insolvency when the Baby Boomer generation retired.

Durbin said that in its current state, the program will sustain retirees for 37 more years.

"If Social Security remains untouched and unchanged, it will make every payment of every retiree of every month of every year until 2042," Durbin said.

Schakowsky presented a slideshow that displayed projected statistics of what would happen under Bush's plan: A 20-year-old today who lives for 20 years after retirement would lose a total of \$152,000, and an 18-year-old today who retires in 2051 would receive only 32 percent of his or her deserved Social Security benefits under the privatization plan.

These statistics caught Loyola freshman Kellan Fitzgerald's attention because they reflected her possible future. Fitzgerald said she found **Schakowsky's** presentation to be the most convincing part of the meeting.

"In 45 years this will affect us the most," Fitzgerald said. "We need to know the issues and stand up for our generation. My views are more conservative [than most of the panel's], but I agree with not privatizing Social Security."

Mo Cahill, 50, of Rogers Park, traveled to the Water Tower campus to hear Schakowsky speak and sell homemade buttons. Cahill attends social forums to sell her politically-oriented buttons, which are adorned with anti-war and anti-corporation slogans, among others.

A self-described "Jan Fan," Cahill said she agreed with **Schakowsky's** idea that the real Social Security crisis is embedded in Bush's plan.

Curiosity and a sense of the duties of citizenship led Loyola sophomore Dominick Kaczynski to attend the meeting.

"The president is giving a faulty message and the senators cleared up a lot of facts people were not [sure] about," Kaczynski said. "[There would be a] big risk investing in the stock market. Statistically it is proven that the mechanics [of privatization] are worse off."

Obama encouraged citizens to educate themselves about Social Security. According to Obama, there is no need to exaggerate, overstate or expose bad motives behind Bush's proposal because his plan has no merit.

Both Republican and Democratic congressmen are hosting town hall meetings on the Bush's privatization plan.